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SUBJECT: LEADING UP TO SURINAMESE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN 2010,
DESI BOUTERSE STRENGTHENS HIS POLITICAL BLOC

11. (U) SUMMARY. Jules Wijdenbosch and Desi Bouterse agreed to re-unite their two political parties, the Democratic National Platform 2000 (DNP 2000) and the National Democratic Party (NDP), according to reports. A union of Bouterse and Wijdenbosch, who went from party colleagues and close personal friends to foes during Wijdenbosch's tenure as President (1996-2000), would create a politically stronger opposition. With general elections scheduled for 2010, this is bad news for the ruling New Front Plus coalition, which is small and still not yet in election mode. END SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

12. (U) When Desi Bouterse's National Democratic Party (NDP) won elections in 1996, Bouterse nominated his protégé Jules Wijdenbosch for President, knowing their friendship would assure him a powerful behind-the-scenes role. In 1997, Wijdenbosch appointed Bouterse as "Advisor of State" in response to a Dutch warrant for Bouterse's arrest on drug charges. The position of Advisor brought former military strongman Bouterse back to the center of power and provided him the cover of diplomatic immunity when traveling abroad. However, the relationship between Suriname and the Netherlands soured due to Bouterse's involvement in government, and the country's economy deteriorated; Wijdenbosch fired Bouterse in early 1999, and later that year saw himself and his government kicked out of power by mass demonstrations in May. The subsequent election brought the New Front coalition into its leadership role, and the National Party of Suriname's (NPS) Ronald Venetiaan into the presidency. Wijdenbosch subsequently established his own political party, Democratic National Platform 2000 (DNP 2000), seeming to put a definitive end not only to his partnership with Bouterse, but to the power struggle within the NDP.

Gearing Up for the 2010 Elections

13. (SBU) The rivalry between NDP and DNP 2000 hurt them both during the 2005 elections (when President Venetiaan and his New Front Plus coalition won again), with the DNP 2000's showing particularly disappointing. The opposition in Suriname's 51-member Parliament consists of NDP with 15 seats, the Alliance for Progress (VVP) with 5 seats, and Alternative 1 (A1) with 2 seats. VVP is a coalition of DNP 2000 (3 seats) and two smaller parties (1 seat each). Guno Castelen, Member of Parliament and Secretary of ruling coalition party the SPA (Suriname Labor Party), told Embassy staff it is unlikely that DNP 2000 formally joining the NDP now will shake Parliament up; the opposition parties in Parliament have already been working together informally since 2006. Castelen said he is convinced that the move is part of the current NDP roadmap to the

2010 elections, and conveyed that the ruling New Front Plus coalition, as a whole, is not yet in election mode. When asked if there is a plan to counter the NDP move, the senior politician admitted the eight-party coalition is so caught up in trying to stay together that planning for the 2010 elections is not yet on the agenda.

15. (U) Desi Bouterse and Jules Wijdenbosch are both charismatic figures with large followings. Many Surinamers will never vote for Bouterse because of his involvement in the December 1982 killing of 15 opponents to his regime, and Wijdenbosch is seen as a safer choice. However, many Surinamers dislike Wijdenbosch because of alleged corruption during his presidency and his poor management of the country's economy. His stock soared in 2007, however, when the United National International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea decided the maritime border dispute with Guyana in a manner widely considered favorable to Guyana. Wijdenbosch's defense of national interests in keeping the maritime area free of Guyanese oil prospecting during his Presidency remains his strongest calling card.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) Since October 2005, the NDP party objective has been to send the Venetiaan government home early, but nothing has worked thus far. However, with government approval ratings in the teens and public cynicism towards the government high, if elections were held today, the opposition would be a sure-fire winner. With just over two years to go before general elections, NDP's merger with DNP 2000 is a smart move. It broadens the party base and helps take off some of the NDP's rough edges (the 1980s military rule legacy remains unpalatable for many). Bouterse and Wijdenbosch may

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subscribe to the theory "keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer," but the only real surprise of the alliance is that Bouterse and Wijdenbosch put aside the personal animosity stemming from their bitter break-up in 1999. The public must choose whether to set aside similar animosities in 2010.

LBSCHREIBERHUGHES